

Joyce Carol Oates

**PSYCHIATRIC
SERVICES**

Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction

Psychiatric Services

Joyce Carol Oates

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From *Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction* by Jesse D. Geller, Ph.D. and Paul D. Spector, M.A.

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Introduction

“Psychiatric Services” by Joyce Carol Oates

Countertransference, the therapist’s emotional reactions to the patient, is potentially one of the therapist’s richest sources of information. The therapist-in-training learns through sound supervision that understanding personal feelings can clarify the meaning of the therapeutic process. The supervisory relationship, like the therapeutic relationship, is fraught with hazards and requires a sense of safety and trust if problematic feelings are to be brought to full awareness, accepted, and used therapeutically. In this story a psychiatric resident is anxious and confused because of her empathic involvement with a patient. Her supervisor, instead of helping her to understand that these feelings are the price one pays for practicing the “impossible profession,” increases her sense of powerlessness by his arrogance and presumptuousness.

Psychiatric Services

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“ . . . not *depression*, then?”

“I wouldn’t define it that way, no. That’s listless, indifferent, isn’t it, that’s all ‘life-drained-out, like some of my own patients. . . . No, it’s a confusion of all the genres, I’ve sifted through everything I know, I use my mind on myself but I can’t come to any diagnosis. . . .”

“Whom do you fantasize killing?”

“I can’t come to any diagnosis.”

“. . . what fantasies do you have?”

“. . . I don’t have time for fantasies.”

“What fantasies might you have, if you had time?”

“Haha, that’s a very good line. . . . Well, we all have had fantasies, haven’t we, of murdering people? . . . other people? That must go back into my childhood, it must go back, oh, Jesus, twenty years . . . doesn’t everyone have these fantasies?”

"I don't think everyone does, necessarily."

"Didn't *you*?"

"I'm a woman."

". . . What bothers me is the suicide fantasies, which are new."

"What means do you use?"

"Not the programmed."

"What is it, a thought, an emotion . . . ? A cluster of thoughts . . . ? Is it something that hasn't yet coalesced?"

"I'm sure it has, when I've been asleep, but when I wake up I can't remember. . . . When I'm on duty over there I wake up and can't remember anything about myself, anything private . . . If I'm being paged I hear the name, a code name, *Saul Zimmerman*, but they could be paging anyone, they could be reading off numbers; all I know is that I respond . . . getting like a fireman: the way I suppose firemen must respond. All body."

"What means would you use?"

"Hypodermic? No. I'm too young . . . it was a rumor, Edward Aikley killed himself, did you know that? . . . must have been a hypo, if anything. No, it's something stronger . . . violent . . . *visual* somehow . . . not with pills, like the poor crazy poisoned kids they bring us. . . . No, God. Do you know of Dr.

Aikley?”

“No. . . . When did you begin your residency at County General?”

“ . . . It isn’t procedure, is it, to notify them? . . . My supervisor, uh, you’re not going to notify him, are you?”

“Who is he?”

“Feucht, and he knows about some of this, I mean I’ve talked with him a little, he’s fairly nice . . . he’s interesting . . . says I’m tired.”

“But you disagree with him?”

“Agree, disagree, what does it matter? You know how it is . . . who’s your supervisor? . . . agree, disagree, it makes no difference whatsoever. The disturbing thing is that I’m not as tired as I should be. Everyone else is worn out, but I keep going. . . especially in the last few weeks, when I think of *it*. I mean a kind of doubleness comes over me . . . right there in the emergency ward, doing all the things, a kind of double sense, double vision . . . uh, I would define it as a mental-visual hallucination, but the word hallucination is too strong . . . hey, don’t write that down! . . . No, it’s too strong; there’s nothing visual about it. You didn’t write it down? Okay, I’ll tell you: I feel very . . . I feel very powerful at those times, when I think of it, because it’s, uh, the secret . . . that nobody else knows. The mess is there! . . . 900 people a day we get. . . most of them are black, of course . . . how is it over here? . . . of course, you get

more students; black or white, they're better patients. But Christ, the mess . . . So it occurs to me that *I* know the way out, the way they're all groping for but can't discover . . . *they don't know enough*. So in a crazy way . . . don't write that down, please, in a peculiar way, not serious, not intellectually *serious*, in a peculiar way I feel superior to them and even to the staff . . . even to my supervisor. . . . I think of *it*. The means wouldn't matter. Messes carried in here are instructional . . . I never got such specific instruction at Northwestern, where I went to medical school . . . I mean, it's so clear how and why the poor bastard blew it: some of them shoot themselves in the forehead at such an angle that the bullet ploughs up through the skull, or they try for the heart but shatter the collar bone . . . *they don't know enough*. And the ones who take poison take too much or too little. . . . So I feel very, I would say very superior . . . and I feel very masculine . . . so I don't get tired the way my friends do, which is good for my ego, I feel very masculine and I feel young again."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Yeh, fine. Okay. A scrupulous detailed report, nice handwriting. But I read between the lines and am not impressed: an exhibitionist."

"But he did seem nervous. . . . He talked rapidly, he kept making small jokes and grimaces and asides . . . he looked as if he hadn't slept for a while. I

asked him if he had been taking anything and he said a little Librium, but it didn't seem to help and—”

“Who's his supervisor?”

“He didn't say.”

“So? So ask him.”

“I . . . he. . . . He was out in the corridor waiting with everyone else . . . dressed in old clothes, he hadn't shaved, looked sullen and frightened . . . no one would have guessed who he was, I mean that he was a resident. If they had guessed, someone else would have grabbed him, but as it was I got him. . . . I had the impression he was disappointed to draw me.”

“Why, because you're a woman?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Ha! The little whiner, the bastard, he wants sympathy and someone to talk to, of course he prefers a woman . . . you'll discover it to be a life-pattern in certain personalities. . . . How tall is he?”

“Medium height.”

“Innocuous. All of it is innocuous.”

“He's twenty-eight.”

“I can see that here. . . . Okay, fine. Now who's this, what is this? *Deller?*”

“Yes, you remember, she was the—”

“I don’t remember. Stop trembling.”

“... black woman, in the school system here ... teaches fourth grade. ...”

“Jenny, does your behaviour with your patients resemble your behaviour with me?”

“I ... I don’t know.”

“Do you sit there on the edge of your seat, are your lips bluish with fear? ... do you lower your head like that just very very slightly—no, don’t move!—so that you can gaze at them through your lashes? Don’t be offended, Jenny, why shouldn’t you show yourself to your best advantage, however?”

“Dr. Culloch, I ...”

“You’re an attractive woman, why shouldn’t you live your life to the fullest? ... However, there’s no need to be so nervous with me; what are the rumors, eh? ... what have you heard about me, eh?”

“I wish you wouldn’t laugh at me, Dr. Culloch.”

“Who’s laughing? ... this is chuckling, sighing, this is a sympathetic noise from across the desk. But you! If you’re angry, go red instead of white in the face ... much healthier. Nothing wrong with healthy anger.”

“I’m not angry ...”

“Nothing wrong with healthy anger.”

“I know, but I’m not angry, Dr. Culloch.”

Aren’t you?

“No. No.”

“What is all that passion, then?—all that trembling?”

“Dr. Culloch, I wish you wouldn’t do this—”

“Are you happy here?”

“Oh yes. Yes.”

“We treat women better here, better than the boondocks where you interned; this is a livelier place in every way, do you agree? . . . So you’re happy. So stay happy.”

“Yes, Dr. Culloch.”

“. . . no, you’re not disturbing me. . . . What time is it?”

“. . . You were asleep, weren’t you. I lose track of the time myself . . . it’s probably around two or three . . . my watch is untrustworthy and I can’t see any clocks from here. . . . I’m sorry for waking you up, did I wake you up?”

“It’s all right. It doesn’t matter.”

“ . . . been wanting to call you all evening, but I didn’t get a break until now. I’m on the fourteenth floor, staff lounge, do you know the layout here?”

“No.”

“ . . . The thing is, I feel awfully shaky and embarrassed, I mean about the official nature of it. . . . You aren’t going to report back to Feucht, are you?”

“Who? . . . No.”

“Okay. Jesus, I’m sorry to wake you; I’ll hang up now.”

“No, wait—”

“And the reason I didn’t show up for the second appointment, I didn’t even remember it until a few hours later—a friend of mine was sick, I had to take over for him off and on—I wanted to call you and explain but so much time went by I figured what the hell, you’d forgotten. . . . I’ll hang up now.”

“No. How are you? Do you feel better?”

“ . . . I would say so, yes. Sometimes I feel very happy. That sensation of power I mentioned . . . it’s rather encouraging at times. I realize this is absurd, I realize how crazy it sounds . . . God, I hope nobody’s tapping this telephone! . . . I know I should hang up. . . . The reason I called you is, I feel a little strange. There’s this sensation of power, of happiness, like I used to have as a boy occasionally, and when I was in high school, playing football, occasionally I’d have it also . . . a surge of joy, a pulsation of joy. . . .”

“Euphoria?”

“Euphoria. Do you know what it’s like? . . . Being carried along by the pulse of it, of it, whatever *it* is. . . . So much excitement, so much life and death outside me, carrying me along with it, along with the flow of it. One of my patients died on me, hemorrhaged all over me, I just kept talking to him and didn’t allow either of us to get excited. . . . So I thought I would call you. I’ve been thinking about you, but I haven’t diagnosed my thinking. I’m sorry to have missed the appointment. . . . Could I come see you?”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Of course not. No. What do you want?”

“Dr. Feucht tells me there’s nothing wrong—I’m exaggerating. He says new residents always exaggerate, dramatize. Maybe that’s all it is . . . maybe it’s nothing real. . . . I can’t come see you then?”

“. . . in love with you, eh? Don’t be coy!”

“Dr. Culloch, please—”

“A long nocturnal conversation—special considerations—is this what they taught you in Baltimore, Jenny? The John F. Kennedy Clinic, did they

teach you such things there?”

“He missed his appointment and sounded very excited over the phone. . . I don’t know how he got my number, there must be so many *Hamiltons* in the city. . . .”

“He isn’t seriously disturbed; he’s pleading for your special attention, your love. . . . You’ll learn to recognize these symptoms and not to be flattered by them.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Culloch, but I—”

“Being professional is the acquisition of a single skill: not to let them flatter you into thinking you’re—what? Eh? *God*, eh?—Or *Venus*?”

“But . . . but Dr. Zimmerman . . . Saul. . . . Why did you bring that here? Why . . . What are you going to do with that?”

“Don’t be frightened!”

“Saul—”

“The last three or four days I’ve been awake straight through, by my own choice. I don’t want to be a zombie, I want more control. . . . Don’t be so alarmed, I just brought it to show you: it’s rather handsome, isn’t it? I’m not going to hurt you. I wouldn’t hurt *you*. From where you sit, it probably looks

like a toy gun, maybe; it's amazing how lifelike the toy guns are, and how toy-like the real ones are . . . makes your head spin. There's a difference in price though."

"Is that a real gun?"

". . . insulting . . . castrating . . . No, you're very nice, the first time I saw you out in the hall I thought *She's nice, any nut would have a chance with her* . . . remind me of a cousin of mine, haven't seen for years, slight little girl with freckles, pale skin. . . It's an insult, to ask a person whether he's carrying a toy gun, don't you know that? Don't insult me. Under the circumstances I must strike you as strange enough, but not so strange that I can't give you professional advice . . . don't insult them when they're armed . . . I'm just joking. I'm really just joking . . . The only women at County General are the nurses. I don't think they like me."

". . . You'd better give that to me, you know. To me. You'd better . . ."

"Certainly not. Why should I give it to you?"

"I think it would be a good idea if . . . if you gave it to me."

"Why? It's my own discovery. It's my secret. I want to share it with you in a way, but I don't intend to give it to you."

"But you can't be serious! . . . Why did you bring it here, wrapped up like that-what is that, a towel?—why did you bring it here, if you don't really want

to give it to me? You—you really want to give it to me—don't you? Wouldn't that be better?—You've put me in such a terrible position-I'm sure I should report you—it—you've made me an accessory to—”

“To what? I have a permit for it.”

“A permit? You have . . . ?”

“ . . . walked into the police station down the block from the hospital, bought a permit, went to a gun store, bought the gun. . . . They're expensive but I didn't buy much ammunition . . . You know I'm just fooling around with this, don't you? . . . just fooling around. I certainly don't intend to use it, on myself or anyone.”

“That's right. That's right. . . . Obviously, you brought it here this afternoon to give to me, didn't you? . . . to give to me?”

“It's the smallest size. They have enormous ones . . . with longer barrels so that you can take better aim . . . something so small, so the man told me, has a poor aim, the bullet is likely to veer off in any direction. I don't know anything about guns. Not even rifles. I'm from Winnetka. I didn't have a father interested in hunting. It's amazing, all the things I don't know . . . don't have experience of. Now it's too late.”

“Saul, why don't you let me keep the gun for you? Please?”

“I do have a permit for it. . . . However, not for carrying it on my person; I

don't have a permit to carry a concealed weapon. So maybe I'd better give it to you after all. . . . But can I have it back when I'm well?"

"You're not sick."

"Yes, but when I'm well can I have it back? . . . I can pawn it at the same place I bought it; the man might remember me."

"Yes, of course you can have it back . . . I'll keep it in my desk drawer here . . . I can lock it, this desk is assigned to me for the year . . . no one can open it except me . . . I promise . . . I promise that . . ."

". . . only afraid that if I surrender it I'll lose this feeling I have most of the time . . . it helps me get through the night shift especially . . . With one part of my mind I realize that it's absurd, that the whole thing is absurd . . . I did my stint in psychiatrics too, and I must say I hated it. . . really hated it. . . my supervisor was a bastard, and that wasn't just my private opinion either. I realize it's absurd that I'm talking to you because you don't know anything more than I do, maybe less, you're sitting there terrified . . . but if I give *it* up I might lapse into being terrified . . . and . . . I've always been so healthy, that's the goddam irony. I *am* healthy. Kids dropped out of school, blew their minds entirely, wound up in the expensive asylums along the lake, but not me, not *me*, and my father would go crazy himself if he knew I was having therapy three times a week with *you*. . . . He could do so much more for me! . . . I can hear his voice saying those words, his whining voice. . . . The one thing I'm

ashamed of and must apologize for is frightening you, Dr. Hamilton.”

“ . . . I’m not frightened . . . ”

“ . . . Feucht is away for a conference, Hawaii, he says it’s ordinary nerves and exaggeration, I know he’s right. . . but where does he get the strength from? . . . Aikley, they said he killed himself, did you hear that? . . . no, you didn’t know him . . . what it is, is, something to circle around, a fixed place, . . . a thought . . . the thinking of it, the possibility of it. . . what is it, transcendence? . . . At the same time I’m an adolescent, obnoxious bastard, to come over here and frighten a pretty young woman like you.”

“ . . . aren’t you going to give me the gun? . . . to put in the desk drawer?”

“ . . . maybe I only want revenge, maybe it’s simplistic revenge against the usual people . . . the usual innocent people: my father, my mother. Sometimes I think that if it were possible for me to wipe out my own father, my personal father, I might get to something more primary . . . but . . . uh . . . it’s difficult to talk about these things, I really don’t know how to talk about them. I don’t have the vocabulary. . . . must tell you, a kid in emergency hallucinating . . . shrieking and laughing and really blown . . . *very happy* . . . hadn’t a good vein left in him . . . All I want is to wipe out a few memories and start again from zero but the memories accumulate faster than I can even notice them, faster faster faster. . . . all the time. But how do you wipe the memories away without blowing away the brain?”

"... This is the drawer, see?... and I have the key for it, here. Here."

"Okay."

"Thank you. Thank you."

... sorry to be so ..."

"Thank you very much, Saul, thank you . . . now, you see? . . . Dr. Zimmerman?... you see, I'm locking it up, it's your property and I can even, I can even give you a receipt for it. . . yes, I'll be happy to . . . I'll. . ."

"Are you all right?... not going to faint?"

"I—"

"Are you going to faint? Jesus!"

"No, I'm all right—I'm all right—"

"You sure?"

"I've never fainted in my life."

"... sorry to be disturbing you again . . . you weren't asleep, were you? . . . answered the phone on the first ring, you weren't asleep, were you?"

"No. What do you want, Saul?"

"... just to apologize, I feel I've made such a fool of myself. . . and it isn't

fair to involve you . . . you're younger than I am, aren't you? . . . you have lots of other patients assigned to you, God, I hope they're not as troublesome as I . . . because you know, don't you, Jenny, you *know* . . . I'm really harmless; I'm just temporarily troubled about something. It isn't uncommon."

"I understand. I'm not angry, I'm not frightened . . . well, I admit that I was a little frightened at the hospital today . . . I shouldn't have been so easily upset. . . but the gun itself, seeing it, the gun shocked me . . . it was so real."

"Yes! It was so *real*. So that struck you too?"

"Oh yes it struck me . . . it struck me too."

"Where do you live, Jenny? The operator doesn't give out that kind of information, she says. . . you're not listed in the new directory, are you, you're new to the city just like me . . . Could I come over or is it too late?"

"It's too late, it's very late, Saul."

"What time is it?"

". . . very late. Please. Why don't you visit me at the hospital tomorrow, wouldn't that be soon enough?"

"I realize I'm disturbing you but I had the sense . . . the sensation . . . that you aren't married. . . ? I mean, there's no husband there with you, is there?"

"I'll see you tomorrow. I'll squeeze you in somehow . . . somehow . . . or . . .

. or, please Saul, please, we could talk in the first-floor cafeteria, at the back, I'll wait for you there at noon . . . we can talk there . . . please."

"Look: you demanded I give you the gun. And I did. I obeyed you. *Good boy* you probably thought, *good boy, look how he obeys*. Now you lose interest in me . . . What do you care what I've been going through?"

"I care very much . . ."

". . . I noticed a fly crawling out of some guy's nostril over here, some very old black guy in a coma for five days . . . filling up with maggots, he was, wasn't even dead, they're jammed in here and so stinking sick . . . and the pathologist making jokes about it. . . I wondered if *he* was the one I had wanted to kill and got very upset, to think I'd lost the gun . . ."

". . . *What?*"

"What?"

"What about that man?"

". . . cardiac seizure, he wasn't that old . . . fifty-five, sixty . . . it's hard to tell, they're so wrecked when they come in . . . We're busy over here . . . What kind of a tone did you take with me? . . . You sound *annoyed*."

"What about that man?—I don't believe—"

"What, are you annoyed that I woke you up? Hey look: we're in this

together. I trusted you, didn't I, and you promised me, didn't you, and there's a professional bond between us . . . I'm not just another patient off the streets, off the campus, there's a professional bond between us, so don't take that tone with me. I order people around too: all the time, in fact. I order women around all the time. And they obey me. You bet they obey me! So don't you take that annoyed tone with me."

"Saul, I'm not annoyed—but I think you must be—must be imagining—must be exaggerating—"

" . . . the purpose of this call was, I think it was. . . uh. . . to apologize for frightening you earlier today. And to ask you to keep it private, all right? The business about the gun. I mean, don't include it on your report, will you, you needn't tell him everything. . . . Don't be annoyed with me, please, I think I'll be through it soon . . . out the other side, soon . . . I'll be rotated to obstetrics in seventeen days which should be better news . . . unless some freaky things happen there too . . . it's a different clientele here, you know, from what I was accustomed to. . . . Hey look: don't be annoyed with me, you're my friend, don't be annoyed that I almost caused you to faint today."

"I didn't faint. . . I didn't come near to fainting."

" . . . well, if. . ."

"I've never fainted in my life."

"You *what?*—Oh, you romantic girl! You *baby!*"

" . . . What? I don't understand. Did I do something wrong, Dr. Culloch?"

"Wrong? Wrong? *Everything you have done is wrong.* Oh, it would be comic if not so alarming, that you came to us knowing so little—so meagerly trained—Had you only textbook theory, you could have handled that problem more professionally! And with the background you have, before the Baltimore clinic you were where? Nome, Alaska?—an adventuresome young woman, not a lily, a wilting fawning creature—and a year at that girls' detention home or farm or whatever in Illinois—*didn't you learn anything?* To be sure manipulated by a cunning paranoid schizophrenic—to have him laughing up his sleeve at you—"

"But—"

"But! Yes, *but.* But but but.—You did exactly the wrong thing in taking that gun away from him. *Don't you know anything?*"

" . . . I did the wrong thing, to take it away . . . ?"

"Absolutely. Now, you explain to *me* why it was wrong."

"It was wrong?"

" . . . why it was idiotic, imbecilic."

“ . . . but . . . It was wrong because . . . it must have been wrong because . . . because . . . I affirmed his suicidal tendencies? Is that it, Dr. Culloch?. . . I affirmed his suicidal tendencies . . . I took him seriously . . . therefore . . .”

“Go on.”

“ . . . therefore . . . I indicated that he didn’t have rational control and responsibility for his own actions . . . yes, I see . . . I think I see now. . . it was a mistake because I showed him that in fact I didn’t trust him: I took him at his word, that he would commit suicide.”

“Not only that, my dear, let’s have some fun with you . . . eh? Under cover of being the Virgin Mary and mothering him out of your own godliness, you in fact used it as a cover, the entire session, to act out your own willfulness and envy of men . . . Eh? What do you say? Ah, blushing, blushing! . . . And well you might blush, eh?. . . So you turn him loose, the pathetic little bastard, a castrated young man turned loose . . . and you have the gun, eh? . . . locked up safely, eh? . . . so you gloat about it and can’t wait to rush in here to let me know the latest details, eh? Fortunate for you that Max Culloch has been around a long time . . . a very very long time . . . and knows these little scenarios backwards and forwards.”

“Dr. Culloch—are you joking?”

“Joking? I?”

“Sometimes you—you tease us so—”

“If you silly little geese giggle, can I help it? I have a certain reputation for my wit, I do admit it, and a reputation—wholly unearned, I tell you in all modesty—as—what?—eh?—being rather young for my age, eh?—is that what they gossip about?—but you won’t gossip with them, Jenny, will you? Of this year’s crop you are *very* much the outstanding resident; I tell you that frankly . . . Only because you struck me originally as being so superior can I forgive you for this asinine blunder: affirming a paranoid schizophrenic in his suicidal delusions.”

“I did wrong . . . I did wrong, then, in taking the gun from him?”

“Don’t squeak at me in that little-mouse voice, you’re a woman of passion and needn’t make eyes at me and look through your hair . . . and don’t sit like that, as if you’re ashamed of your body, why be ashamed? . . . you’re attractive, you know it, your physical being is most attractive and *it* senses that power whether you do or not, Dr. Hamilton . . . right? I’m decades older than you, my dear, I’m seventy- three years old and I know so much, so very much, that it’s sometimes laughable even to deal with ordinary people. . . . It’s become a burden to me, my own reputation, a genius, my own fame is a burden to me because it obliges me to take so seriously and so politely the opinions of my ignorant colleagues . . . when I’d like simply to pull switches, shut them up, get things done as they must be done. At least you young people

don't argue with me: you know better. . . . so. Let us review this fascinating lesson, Jenny. What did you do wrong?"

"I did wrong to take the gun from him and to affirm his suicidal inclinations. And . . . and he had a permit for the gun, too . . . at least to own a gun . . . It wasn't illegal, his owning the gun . . . And so I was exerting power over him. . . ."

"Gross maternal power, yes. The prettier and smaller you girls are, the more demonic! . . . Your secret wish right this moment, Jenny, is—is what? eh? You'd like to slap old Dr. Culloch, wouldn't you?"

"Not at all—"

"Someday we'll let you; why be so restrained? . . . But at the moment, I think it wisest for you to undo the harm you've done to that poor boy. You'd better telephone him and ask him to come over and take the gun back."

". . . ask him to take it back?"

" . . . or is he your lover, and you would rather not call *him*?"

"He isn't my lover!"

". . . who is, then? Or have you many?"

"I haven't any lovers! I have my work. . . ."

"Yet you're attracted to him aren't you? I can literally smell it—I can

smell it—the bizarre forms that love-play can take—”

“I’m not attracted to him, I feel sorry for him—I—I’m not attracted to him. I have my work . . . I work very hard . . . I don’t have time for . . . ”

“I am your work.”

“ . . . Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“Everything is processed through me. Everything in this department . . . Do you dream about me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And what form do I take?”

“What form? . . . The form . . . the form you have now.”

“No younger?”

“I . . . I don’t know . . . Dr. Culloch, this is so upsetting to me, it’s so confusing and embarrassing . . . I never know when you’re joking and when you’re serious.”

“I am always joking and always serious. You may quote me.”

“ . . . I’ve become so mixed up during this conversation, I can’t remember

what . . . what we were talking about . . .”

“ . . . not that I’m Max Culloch of even eight years ago . . . Yeh, pot-bellied, going bald, with this scratchy scraggly beard . . . but . . . *but*. You understand, eh? Many a young rival has faded out of the dreamwork entirely when old Max appears. It’s nature. . . . The one thing I don’t like, Jenny, is the possibility of your arranging this entire scenario with the aim of manipulating Max. . . . I wouldn’t like that at all. *Did you?*”

“Did I . . . ?”

“Play with the boy, take the gun, rush into my office this morning just to tantalize me with your power? . . . force me to discipline you? . . . No, I rather doubt it; you’re cunning, but not *that* cunning. No. I’m inclined to think it was a simple error, one of inexperience rather than basic ignorance, and that it shouldn’t be held against you. It’s only nature, that you would like to manipulate me. But you haven’t a clue, my child, as to the means.”

“ . . . I . . . I . . . Yes, that’s right. You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.”

“ . . . nothing was intentional, nothing at all. When I saw the gun I followed my instincts . . . my intuition. . . I forgot to analyze the situation in terms of its consequences. . . when I saw the gun I thought No, *I don’t want him to die, no, I like him, I don’t want*—So I acted without thinking.”

“And did you faint in his arms, my dear?”

“Of course not.”

“Love-play on both sides. Totally unconscious, totally charming. Do you see it now, rationally?”

“I . . . I didn’t see it at the time, but now . . . now . . . you’re probably right.”

“Probably?”

“You’re right.”

“And so?”

“ . . . and . . . ?”

“And so what will you do next?”

“I . . . I will telephone him and admit my error.”

“And?”

“ . . . tell him I misjudged him . . . that he can pick the gun up any time he wants it . . . I’ll tell him that my supervisor has . . . ”

“No, no. No sloughing off of authority!”

“ . . . tell him . . . tell him that I trust him . . . and . . . it was an emotional error on my side . . . inexperience . . . fear . . . I trust him and . . . and I know he’ll be safe with the gun . . . ”

“Go on, go on! You’ll have to speak to him more convincingly than that. And smile—yes, a little—yes, not too much—try to avoid that bright manic grin, Jenny, it looks grotesque on a woman with your small facial features . . . The boy is an idealist like everyone, and like everyone he must learn. . . as I learned and you will, eh? . . . or will you? . . . he’s an idealist and stupid that way but not so stupid that he wouldn’t be able to see through that ghastly smile of yours. I have the impression, Jenny, that you don’t believe me: that you’re resisting me. Are you trying to antagonize me?”

“No, of course not! I’m . . . I’m just very nervous. I didn’t sleep at all last night. I’m very nervous and . . .”

“Chatter, chatter! . . . So you’ve given your young friend his gun back . . . you’ve made things right between you again . . . yeh, fine, fine. Now what?”

“Now . . . ?”

“Now what do you say? Will you say anything further?”

“. . . I will say that. . . that he’ll be rotated out of the service he’s in, and he’ll be eventually out of the hospital . . . maybe he’ll have a private practice in the area . . . his hometown is north of here, along the lake . . . and . . . and . . . and he’ll escape, he’ll forget. . . I can’t remember what I was saying.”

“What a goose! . . . At any rate, what do you think *he* will say? When you give him his masculinity back?”

“He’ll say . . .”

“Think hard!”

“He’ll say . . . probably . . . He’ll probably say *Thank you.*”

“*Thank you?*”

“*. . . Thank you.*”